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SUBJECT: NAJAF: ISCI BOXED OUT AS COALITION-BUILDING
CONTINUES

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Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor John G. Fox for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

(U) This is a PRT Najaf message.

11. (C) Summary: The provincial election results mark the end of one-party Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) domination in Najaf and will usher in a power-sharing coalition in one of southern Iraq's most religiously and politically important provinces. ISCI's Shahid al-Mihrab list and Prime Minister Maliki's Da'wa-led State of Law list won an equal number of seats, giving the Sadrists Free Trend (which won only one fewer seat) a strong role as king-maker. The most likely result is a Da'wa-led coalition that includes the Sadrists, Adnan al-Zurfi's Loyalty to Najaf, and ex-Prime Minister Ja'afari's Reform Trend. The final outcome is still uncertain, however, due to political brinkmanship orchestrated from Baghdad. The three main Shi'a movements (ISCI, Da'wa, Sadrists) are vying intensely and negotiating creatively to gain executive positions in the next provincial government, including Najaf Provincial Director of Police (PDOP) and head of the Najaf Reconstruction Committee (NRC), in addition to Governor, Deputy Governor and Provincial Council (PC) Chairman. End Summary.

Breaking Down the Numbers

12. (SBU) Despite early optimism from ISCI that it would retain its majority or at least lead a majority coalition in the next provincial government, strong performances by its two biggest rivals -- Da'wa's State of Law list and the Sadrists Free Trend list -- put them in a difficult position. ISCI- and Da'wa-backed lists tied with seven seats apiece (out of 28 on the Council), while the Sadrists won six. The Loyalty to Najaf list headlined by Ministry of Interior intelligence official and former Najaf Governor Adnan al-Zurfi netted four seats, former PM Ja'afari's Reform Trend won two, and the Independent Union of Najaf, an erstwhile ISCI ally, also won two. The province reelected only five sitting PC members, most notably State of Law candidate and close PRT interlocutor Sheikh Fayed al-Shimmeri, Deputy Governor Abtan (ISCI), and Deputy PC Chairman Sheikh Khaled al-Numani (ISCI).

13. (C) ISCI used its dominance in the 2005 election to place a former Badr commander as Provincial Director of Police and to stock the Najaf Reconstruction Committee with its members. As a result, provincial budgets were funneled toward projects favored by the ISCI Governor and Deputy Governor, such as the province's contribution to the Najaf International Airport. (Note: the NRC is the enhanced equivalent of the Provincial Reconstruction Development Council.) Appointments to these positions are now being heavily contested and have emerged as keys to the overall coalition-building process.

Current Provincial Leadership Continues to Hold on and Hope

¶4. (C) Governor Asaad Abu Gelal al-Taie, an ISCI nominee, fell out of favor with party leadership prior to the election and, according to multiple first-hand sources, has courted and been courted by PM Maliki to align against his former party. Governor Asaad continues to lobby either to remain Governor as part of a State of Law coalition, act as placeholder until a more acceptable replacement is found after a new coalition is formed, or receive another high-level government appointment. Governor Asaad has mused with PRT officers about possibly accepting an ambassadorial post in a western country.

¶5. (C) Over the past six months, PRT officers personally witnessed open hostility between Governor Asaad and Deputy Governor Abtan, ISCI's front man for the election campaign and one-time heir apparent. Maintaining productive relations with both politicians proved challenging, but possible, to the PRT. After a recent meeting we had with Abtan, Governor Asaad repeatedly called PRT locally-engaged staff to inquire nervously about the details of the meeting, and dropped by personally a day later to demonstrate his own good relations with the PRT.

¶6. (C) Abtan appeared despondent when he sat down with us. He said he has been negotiating with all of the lists to form a "unity government" in Najaf, which would include all parties and grant ISCI some provincial leadership positions, but had been unable to get Da'wa to bite. Follow-on ISCI negotiations with the Sadrist Free Trend list have proved similarly unsuccessful to date, with one source suggesting

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ISCI offered the Sadrists the governorship in return for joining a coalition with it. Abtan continues to parade before the media as a top Najaf official, welcoming Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa and the first-ever Syrian direct flight to Najaf. (Comment: Due to his close personal relationship to Abdel Aziz and Ammar al-Hakim, Abtan's future in Iraq will remain closely tied to ISCI -- in Najaf, Baghdad, or beyond. End Comment.)

Najaf's Sadrists: At the Table at Last

¶7. (C) Najaf's numerous Sadrist followers sat out the 2005 provincial election, but responded strongly this January, securing six seats on the next PC. Several PRT contacts express concern that most of the new Sadrist members have limited government, management or political experience. Governor Asaad informed the PRT the Sadrists had three demands heading into the coalition process: Provincial Director of Police, Najaf Reconstruction Committee Chair, and amnesty for Sadrist affiliates currently being held in Najaf jails. The Governor expressed concern over all three points and said that the Sadrists' political immaturity, combined with their inability to differentiate political from security demands, has already caused problems.

Comment

¶8. (C) In the end, the six Sadrist seats will need to join forces with somebody to establish a PC governing coalition with a conclusive majority. Da'wa is the best suited to lead the coalition due to the PM's personal popularity, the party's seven seats, its outreach to the Sadrists and its previous affiliation with Loyalty to Najaf and Ja'afari's Reform Trend. ISCI is likely to be the odd man out, despite Abtan's concerted attempts to make a deal that would keep him in power. The PRT has close and established ties to all of the party lists except the Sadrists.

¶9. (C) Recent PRT attempts to reach out to newly-elected

Sadrists have met with a mixed response. Amjad Shihab (reftel), one of the leading Sadrist personalities elected to office, expressed no direct antipathy toward the PRT or the U.S. government, but claimed he could not meet with us openly because his followers would not approve. Instead, he suggested a joint meeting with the United Nations to give him plausible cover. We believe the Sadrists intend to focus on provincial development and the delivery of essential services, and will treat us as partners once they realize that the PRT is in a position to help in these areas. Potential Sadrist obfuscation of security and detainees, and the continued presence of Special Group elements in the province, could present difficulties to ongoing U.S.-Iraqi operations targeting Jaysh al-Mahdi affiliates still known to reside in Najaf. End Comment.
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